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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 08 TEL AVIV 003539

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IPA DGREENE, NEA/PPD FOR JSMITH, DBENZE
STATE INFO FOR DRL/IRF
JERUSALEM PASS ICD DANIELS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: A Political Map of the Orthodox Movement in Israel

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1. (U) Summary: The Jewish Orthodox sector in Israel today is composed of an increasingly complex fabric, from ultra-orthodox to "modern" or "liberal" orthodox. Religious strands are represented by political parties in the Knesset -- from Shas and Agudat Yisrael to the National Religious Party (NRP) and its breakaway "Hitchabrut" ("Re-engagement") faction, to the Labor-affiliated Meimad party of Deputy Education Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior. Comprised of people with diverging religious and political worldviews, the orthodox movement includes men and women of vastly differing political ideologies as well as slightly diverging theologies. Moreover, the degree of a person's religious orthodoxy or level of religious observance does not always -- or predictably -- correspond with the degree to which the person can be defined as right or left-wing on critical social and political issues facing Israel's democracy today. Religiously right can include the politically left, and religiously left/secular can include the most hawkish of political views. Understanding the religious sector in Israel is critical because Israel's coalition politics often give small parties, including the religious parties, influence far exceeding their electoral weight. End Summary.

The Spectrum of Religious Belief: Defining Terms

2. (SBU) Demographic figures in Israel isolating Jewish religious belief and observance vary widely and are therefore difficult to pin down with any precision. Most observers agree that the Jewish ultra-orthodox sector in Israel makes up some six to eight percent of Israel's Jewish population. The National Religious, or Religious Zionist community (referred to as "dati leumi" in Hebrew), meanwhile, makes up some 17 percent of Israel's Jewish population. Taken together, therefore, the orthodox constitute about 25 percent of Israel's Jewish population and about 20 percent of Israel's population overall.

3. (SBU) Using widely accepted definitions, the ultra-orthodox (called "haredim" in Israel, meaning ones who tremble or fear God), are the distinctively garbed Jews for whom religious studies and sheltered religious life are of primary importance. Their black clothing and head coverings are based on the 18th and 19th century apparel of European Jewry, and today they wear it to set themselves apart from the general population. Religious Zionists, meanwhile, according to the late Professor Daniel Elazar, founder of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, "are similar to the modern or centrist orthodox Jews in the Diaspora, partaking of most of the aspects of modern civilization except that they maintain orthodox observance of Jewish religious law and tradition."

4. (SBU) Therefore, the word "religious" ("dati") is somewhat synonymous with the American usage of the term modern orthodox, depending on the context, while "haredi" refers to ultra-orthodox. Most Jews who define themselves as "religious" or "observant" in Israel are orthodox. Reform, Conservative-Masorti, Reconstructionist, and other religious movements, which encompass a large segment of the Jewishly affiliated population in the U.S. and elsewhere in the Diaspora, do not yet have a large foothold in Israel, though they continue to expand their reach. Most American Jews who would define themselves as Reform or even Conservative/Masorti would be considered by the ultra-orthodox in Israel as "secular" in the Israeli context. The term "traditional" in Israel has widely varying meanings depending on the speaker's perspective. Elazar places some 55 percent of Israelis in this

category - Jews who "value traditional Jewish life, but who are prepared to modify Jewish practices required by Jewish religious law in those cases where they believe it to be personally necessary or attractive to do so." As a result of such an expansive definition of traditional, Elazar categorizes only 20 percent of Israelis as "secular." If, instead of that approach, one defines as "secular" all those who are not orthodox (whether haredim or religious Zionist versions of orthodox), the percentage of secular Jews could go up to 70-80 percent of Israel's Jewish population. In short, when referring to groups in Israel, one must consider the source before interpreting terms such as "religious," "traditional" and "secular," which may seem unambiguous at first.

15. (SBU) Given the strong religious component in Israeli society, one would expect to find strong religious parties influencing Israeli policy. However, even religious Israelis do not always determine their party affiliation via the religious-secular prism, and, except for the ultra-orthodox, they do not necessarily vote for religious parties. National Religious-Religious Zionist Israelis, for example, mostly voted for the National Religious Party in the early decades of the State, but today they can be found in the Likud and in other, often right-of-center, non-religiously affiliated parties. Furthermore, the religious parties often cannot encompass for long the multiplicity of views and positions within them, resulting in sub-groups and splits that then re-form, consolidate, and often fracture again.

Religious Parties: Background, Voters, Key Positions

16. (SBU) The political parties representing the orthodox religious sector in Israel divide on their relations with the State of Israel, the disengagement plan, on army service, and on countless social and economic issues. Outside the political arena altogether is the small Neturei Karta group (Guardians of the City), ultra-orthodox anti-Zionists who reject the State and often side with its most virulent critics. Satmar hassids and a tiny minority group within Chabad Lubavitch hassids also reject the State.

17. (SBU) Within the accepted political sphere, religious parties differ over the importance of the "State of Israel" vs. the "land of Israel," over the religious significance of the establishment of the State, and their degree of involvement in the society and the broader life of the country. At one end of the spectrum, some ultra-orthodox groups see political/nationalist Zionism as taboo, with the epithet "Zionist" having a pejorative connotation. Other groups, particularly within the Religious Zionist camp, see the State as the ultimate good, an almost messianic achievement, while others in the same camp place "the land of Israel" above the "State of Israel" in religious significance. The following paragraphs take a closer look at each of the religious parties and review their background and key positions.

Ultra-Orthodox ("Haredi") Parties

18. (SBU) A diverse movement that encompasses different strands, the ultra-orthodox include both Sephardi and Ashkenazi groupings, with cross cutting and distinguishable differences in liturgy, styles of observance, and manners of dress. In Israel's pre-state history, members of this movement were by and large anti-Zionist. They believed that only God could establish Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. Certain pre-conditions had to be met, primarily the coming of the messiah. Also, a state under Jewish sovereignty would be governed by Jewish law (halacha). Since the aggressively secularist "political Zionism" of the founders of the State did not meet these conditions, the haredi view was that there should not yet be Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. But as Tel Aviv University Professor Menachem Friedman explained, "The Holocaust in Europe changed things. Many ultra-orthodox dropped their active opposition to Zionism and became non-Zionists instead of anti-Zionists, because the Jewish people had to go somewhere, and the gates to the rest of the world were locked. So they came to Israel."

19. (SBU) Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, reached a "status quo" agreement with the ultra-orthodox that convinced some of them to join the Israeli government -- or at least not to oppose it --

in return for the government's agreeing to carve out certain areas which would allow the ultra-orthodox to feel at home in Israel. The agreement provided for some Jewish religious observance in the Israeli public space: recognition of the Jewish Sabbath as the official day of rest; observance of kosher dietary laws in government kitchens; provision for a system of orthodox religious education; exemption from the draft of young men studying in yeshivas, as well as young religiously observant women; application of Jewish religious law to issues of personal status - marriage, divorce, and conversion. The "status quo" agreement allowed the ultra-orthodox to live in Israeli society, and participate politically, but still remain slightly apart. Attempts over the years by the predominantly secular political establishment of Israel to change the "status quo," and thereby increase the separation between church (or synagogue, in this case) and state, have so far largely failed.

Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox: Agudat Yisrael/Degel HaTorah

10. (SBU) Background: The State of Israel was founded by secular leftists who fled the Eastern European world of the shtetl and yeshiva and sought to create a state based on Jewish national identity, not religious orthodoxy. Orthodox parties such as Agudat Yisrael were anti-Zionist from formation in Europe in 1912 until the late 1930s, and later became non-Zionist, still not recognizing the legitimacy of founding the Jewish State of Israel on the land of Israel, but nevertheless coming to an understanding with Ben Gurion via the "status quo" agreement. Under the status quo arrangement, Agudat Yisrael joined the government from 1949 to 1953. In 1953, the United Religious Front, an amalgam of all the religious parties at that time, split, with the pro-Zionist Mizrachi element staying in and Agudat Yisrael moving out of government. In the 50 years since, the ultra-orthodox have been in and out of government, sometimes in temporary alliances such as United Torah Judaism (UTJ). When the aggressively secularist "Shinui" ("Change") party, headed by Yosef Lapid, scored major gains in the 2003 Knesset elections, it formed a coalition with Sharon's Likud on the condition that no ultra-orthodox parties would be in the government.

11. (SBU) Prime Objectives: The Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox community's main goal is to preserve Torah study and to have its community live according to Jewish law. Its parties, therefore, are mainly concerned with securing funding for yeshivas and educational institutions. Because many haredi men study full time and cannot support themselves and their families from donations and charity alone, they require state funding, best secured by their parties being represented within the governing coalition. In January of 2005, therefore, UTJ (composed of Agudat Yisrael with three Knesset members and Degel HaTorah with two Knesset members) joined the coalition and saved Prime Minister Sharon's majority, which was threatened when Shinui and the National Religious Party left. Shinui had quit over funding for ultra-orthodox parties, and the remnants of the NRP left the coalition over opposition to the disengagement policy. UTJ faction chief Rabbi Avraham Ravitz told Israel's Army Radio that his party was joining the coalition only to secure new concessions on some of the key issues on its agenda, principally more state funding for ultra-orthodox Jewish schools. It should be noted that shortly after joining Sharon's coalition, the UTJ split, with Agudat Yisrael and Degel Hatorah once again becoming separate parties.

12. (SBU) Core voters: The Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox community. A higher value is placed on Torah study than on earning a living. With few exceptions, adherents do not serve in the army and have resisted many parliamentary efforts to draft them into army service.

13. (SBU) Disengagement. The leadership generally opposes disengagement. The issue is not central, though, to the ultra-orthodox community, which does not have a constituency in the Gaza settlements. (There are three ultra-orthodox settlements, all in the West Bank.) Most rabbis in the ultra-orthodox community have not been outspoken on the issue of whether soldiers should refuse orders to participate in the evacuation of settlements.

14. (SBU) The State of Israel. Agudat Yisrael does not regard the State as having any religious significance. As noted above, many condemn the establishment of the

State as an act of rebellion against Divine providence, arguing that Jews should have waited for God to set up a place of refuge in Israel rather than doing it for themselves. For this reason, Agudat Yisrael's politicians do not accept posts as ministers, but serve only as deputy ministers and chairmen of Knesset committees. (For example, Yaacov Litzman of Agudat Yisrael is currently Chair of the Knesset Finance Committee.) Some in the younger generation are showing signs of coming to terms with the existence of the Jewish state, though they still deny it religious legitimacy. In this group, some vote for Likud rather than ultra-orthodox or orthodox parties, seeing in the Likud a right-wing agenda combined with respect for religion and greater opportunities for influence on the State from within a non-religious party.

Sephardi Ultra-Orthodox: Shas

15. (SBU) Background: Established in 1983, the Sephardi ultra-orthodox party Shas is both a religious haredi party parallel to Ashkenazi Agudat Yisrael and an ethnic party for Jews who emigrated to Israel mostly from North Africa, known as Sephardim. As Professor Friedman explained, "The origins of Shas as a movement and as a political party were based on a reaction to internal discrimination in the decades leading up to 1983, in which Sephardi children were educated in Ashkenazi frameworks to 'save' them from secularism." With maturity, the Sephardi Jews "copied the Ashkenazi model," according to Shas activist Rabbi Arie Smadja, and established their own separate yeshivas and other educational institutions separate from the dominant Ashkenazi institutions. Rabbi Smadja explained that, with these social developments, Shas also began to develop a distinct political identity.

16. (SBU) Prime objectives. As with Agudat Yisrael, Shas participates in government largely to assure maximum funding for its religious institutions. Professor Menachem Friedman points out that "Shas has no life in the opposition," and therefore, it has historically joined coalitions on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. The presence of the ideologically secular Shinui in the Sharon government from early 2003 to late 2004 presented a unique stumbling block to Shas' entry into the governing coalition. Shas must have government funds to support its separate Sephardi ultra-orthodox educational institutions and social programs. The party is a strong advocate of increased spending on social welfare to assist its primarily blue-collar voters, many of whom live in Israeli towns suffering from high unemployment.

17. (SBU) Core voters: Shas voters are drawn from the various Sephardi communities, including ultra-orthodox, orthodox/dati and "traditional." More than is the case with other religious parties, its voters also include a large number of non-observant Jews, though these are people who respect religious leaders and hold religion in high regard. Unlike the average Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox voter who is dedicated to full time study, the average Shas voter works and serves in the army.

18. (SBU) Disengagement: The Shas leadership generally opposes disengagement from the territories and uprooting of settlements on both religious and national security grounds, though spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef accepts in principle that territories may be evacuated, based on the primacy of saving Jewish life over the sanctity of land. On a related issue, Rabbi Yosef also opposes the refusal of orders by soldiers, a position he first stated in 1995 and which he has not changed since. Rabbi Arie Smadja notes that Shas, like Agudat Yisrael, has no firm ideology on the greater land of Israel. The ultra-orthodox position, he argues, is that the "Jewishness of Jews" -- their ability to live as observant Jews wherever they might be -- is of supreme importance, not the sanctity of the land.

19. (SBU) The State of Israel. Shas supports the State and, when in the government, its politicians serve as ministers. It regards the State as having religious significance, but does not subscribe to the more messianic views of some of the national religious/religious Zionist groups.

Modern Orthodox: National Religious Party (NRP)

20. (SBU) Background: The NRP was founded in 1956 to

apply spiritual values to governing a modern nation-state. Journalist/commentator Yair Sheleg has said that the religious Zionists have an "ideological and psychological need not to be isolated from the secular world and general society." Religious Zionists saw their role as improving the spirit of the people and looked to the Israeli Chief Rabbinate for their spiritual guidance. Until 1967, the NRP was a junior member in coalition governments and successfully established the state religious educational institutions and flagship yeshiva high schools. After 1967, with what many young religious Israelis saw as the miraculous, messianic return to the biblical lands of Israel, the NRP became almost synonymous with the settler movement, and, more recently, with resistance to withdrawal from any settlements whether in the West Bank or Gaza.

21. (U) Former NRP MK Yehuda Ben Meir notes that "between 1974 and today, Israel's national religious population has undergone far-reaching social, cultural, educational, demographic and ideological changes." The more strongly ideological part of that population has influenced the educational system and the youth organizations of the national religious population, and, Ben Meir argues, has "moved mainstream religious Zionism to the right, to the point that religious Zionism as a whole came to symbolize the right wing of Israeli politics. It spawned some extreme and uncontrolled offshoots, such as 'noar hagvaot' (the hilltop youth) and movements along the lines of Kach, the outlawed extremist political party."

22. (SBU) Prime objectives. In its first twenty years, the NRP leadership and voters' primary interest was in education, combining a religious lifestyle with a full contribution to the wider society, and in fulfilling a "bridging" role between the religious and secular in Israel. The maintenance and expansion of settlements has been its main issue since 1967. In the wake of its defeat in the political fight to stop the disengagement, many NRP politicians are returning to stress issues that were its core objectives before, including the maintenance of its educational system, its advocacy of integrating the values of work and religious observance, and improving the Jewish character of the State of Israel.

23. (SBU) Core voters: The national religious (sometimes called by the shorthand "knitted kippa") community. Its adherents are schooled in the state's religious school system, parallel to the secular system. They participate fully in the economy, and serve in the army, including in increasingly significant numbers in the officer corps.

24. (SBU) Disengagement. This party has the most complex relationship to the disengagement issue. Most settlers are identified with the religious nationalist movement, even though today the majority of settlers vote for parties further to the right of the NRP. They moved to the territories both because of political nationalist ideology and out of religious fervor with the 1967 capture of biblically significant sites. The settlements issue has divided the party between hard-liners and those who identify more closely with the overall social/economic agenda of the NRP. Hard-line MKs more closely associated with the "Hardal" (haredi dati leumi, the ultra-orthodox nationalist/Zionist movement), including Rabbi Yitzhak Levy and Effie Eitam, finally split from the NRP and formed the "Hitchabrut" ("Re-engagement") party, due to their opposition to the disengagement and the NRP's decision at that time to stay in Sharon's coalition.

25. (SBU) Other NRP MKs, who have since also left Sharon's coalition, are trying to restore the balance in the party and return it to its traditional wider interests. NRP MK Gila Finkelstein - the first woman NRP member to be elected to the Knesset in over two decades - told us that the NRP's position on disengagement is based on both religious and national security considerations. Finkelstein also explained, "the NRP's interests are really broad-spectrum, giving equal emphasis to education, social issues, religion, and the land of Israel. Each of these flags is raised to the same level. We consult the rabbis on key issues, but, unlike the ultra-orthodox parties, the rabbis do not decide. The decisions are made by the members." This is another issue on which the NRP and its "Hardal" members divide. The "Hardalniks," largely composed of the children of the traditional national religious public, are more inclined to listen to rabbis of yeshivas where they study, or other charismatic religious leaders, than to the more mainstream, accepted rabbinical authorities. Finkelstein, an

educator and principal for many years at a Tel Aviv area national religious high school, told us that she was among those who fought hard, ultimately without success, to keep the NRP in Sharon's governing coalition, because she wanted to fight disengagement and pursue the NRP's wider secular-religious bridging agenda from within.

126. (SBU) Another emotional and divisive issue for the national religious movement is the issue of refusal of soldiers to obey orders. Highly regarded national religious rabbis have spoken out on both sides of the issue. Notably, the head of the Ateret Cohanim Yeshiva in Jerusalem's Old City, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, a hard-liner on many issues, and contradicting his own mentor, former Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapira, is vehemently against the refusal to obey orders. Aviner issued a ruling in March 2005 that states: "Do not say: the state is finished, I have finished with the state. We have not finished with the state. We have not finished with anything - not with the people, not with the state, and not with the army. We have only just begun. We are now in a great test.... I hereby declare: I love Gush Katif [Jewish settlement area in Gaza] and I love Northern Samaria, but I love my people above all." Aviner's neighbor and fellow Chief Rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Beit El, Rabbi Zalman Melamed, on the other hand, has publicly and repeatedly called on soldiers not to take part in anything related to the disengagement. Another prominent West Bank religious figure, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, has warned of the dangers to Israeli society of rabbis encouraging soldiers to disobey orders. He wrote in the Jerusalem Post this winter, "I am unalterably opposed to those rabbinic voices which call upon the soldiers of the IDF to refuse to obey orders of evacuation claiming that such orders are against absolute Torah law."

127. (SBU) Despite calls from some rabbis for religious soldiers to disobey orders, the vast majority of the religious nationalist population is expected to obey military orders and to continue to be an integral part of Israeli society.

128. (SBU) The State of Israel. Yair Sheleg notes that religious Zionists see the sanctity of the State as the realization of religious prophecy. Many of the movement's rabbis regard the State as the precursor of the Messiah. In the last few years, some NRP members whose religious observance is ultra-orthodox ("Hardalniks") have become estranged and alienated from the State, which they see as having failed in its mission. Others have stayed loyal and see disengagement as a temporary setback that must be endured. Those members see continued political involvement in the State as necessary.

Orthodox Center/Left: Meimad

129. (U) Background: In the mid-1980s, Meimad was founded as an NRP breakaway party with more liberal political and religious views than the NRP. It failed to reach the threshold percentage of votes to enter the Knesset, though it gained some seats in Jerusalem municipal elections. It now exists as a semi-independent one-man faction within the Labor Party, represented by Deputy Minister of Education, MK Rabbi Michael Melchior.

130. (U) Prime Objectives: Meimad members favor territorial compromise; rabbinical leaders are active in interfaith activities, and, while orthodox, are more liberal in religious practices. Some are open, for example, to giving women greater participation in prayer services. They stand at the extreme political left of religious Zionism. Aligned now with the Labor Party, some say Labor uses Meimad's presence to ward off accusations that it is an anti-religious party like Shinui.

131. (U) Core Voters: Meimad voters are liberal in religious and political outlook. Their current voting numbers are unknown, but Meimad supporters almost certainly form less than 10 percent of the Jewish orthodox religious vote.

132. (U) Disengagement: Like its Labor Party partner, Meimad favors the disengagement plan.

133. (U) State of Israel: Meimad members, like the NRP from which many of its members split, are integrally involved in Israeli society and the broader life of the State. They do not see the State in purely messianic terms.

Secular/Religious partnership: National Union Party

134. (SBU) Background: The National Union party was formed for the 1999 elections, and combined three right-wing parties (Herut, Tekuma, and Moledet) that banded together to try to increase their voter appeal and parliamentary effectiveness. They were later joined by the "Yisrael Beteinu" ("Israel: Our Home") party.

135. (SBU) Prime objectives. National Union supports the maintenance and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and opposes the emergence of a Palestinian state west of the river Jordan. Some of their members are also in favor of the voluntary transfer of Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza to other Arab countries.

136. (SBU) Core voters: National Union voters include a heterogeneous mix of right-wing nationalists, both religious and secular.

137. (SBU) Disengagement: This party is bitterly opposed to disengagement from any of the West Bank and Gaza, on both religious and security grounds. It broke from the current Sharon government before the NRP did. Some of its secular members have grown uneasy at the overtly religious tone of protests against disengagement.

138. (SBU) The State of Israel. The National Union fully supports the State, but is not as messianist as the NRP.

Israel's Chief Rabbinate

139. (SBU) The Israeli Chief Rabbinate, which is led by one Ashkenazi and one Sephardi Chief Rabbi, is the State of Israel's official religious authority. The current Chief Rabbis, Yona Metzger (Ashkenazi) and Shlomo Amar (Sephardi), while wielding some influence, are less charismatic and carry less influence than some of their predecessors. They both spoke out in Passover 2005 interviews against soldiers' refusal to obey orders, even though they oppose the disengagement on religious grounds. It is unclear at this point which religious groups adhere to the rulings of the Chief Rabbinate, but it is clear that two previous Chief Rabbis, Avraham Shapira (the head of Israel's most influential modern orthodox yeshiva, Jerusalem's Mercaz Harav) and Mordechai Eliyahu, are more influential than the current incumbents. Both Shapira and Eliyahu have spoken out repeatedly for soldiers to refuse to obey orders to evacuate settlements.

Conclusions

140. (SBU) Polls show that the Israeli public in general is divided on the disengagement issue, with a clear majority favoring the plan. For Israel's religious public, the internal debates and conflicts are often more intense, fanned by divisions on the basic issues of the State of Israel vs. the land of Israel; on the source of authority for religious soldiers -- their commanding officers or their religious leaders; and on the relationship of religion and politics in Israel more broadly.

141. (SBU) Orthodoxy in Israel includes a wide spectrum of religious belief and practice. Across Israel's orthodox spectrum, the majority of voices are against Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and settlements in the West Bank. There is wide variance, though, in the degree of resistance that leading orthodox figures are advocating or supporting and in the degree of resistance likely to be offered by those at the grassroots level. It is not the first time the religious parties will split and re-form into new coalitions, nor the first time many religious voters will find it more advantageous to vote for secular right-wing parties or religious-secular coalition parties like the National Union. What is new since the disengagement debate started in late 2003 is the resurgence in -- not the emergence of -- the level and intensity of those voices rejecting the legitimacy of the State and its elected structures based on perceived betrayal of the land of Israel and violations of Jewish law. For those who hope to understand the factors determining policy positions held by Israel's religious population and to understand the influence of the religious community on the State and society at large,

the political positions and behavior of all these diverse strands within the orthodox movement merit continued attention as the disengagement process moves forward.

KURTZER